



Assessing the significance of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks*

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Abstract. The publication of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* (*Schwarze Hefte*) has provoked a storm of controversy. Much of this has centred on the pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic comments the volumes contain. But these aspects of the *Notebooks* are perhaps the least surprising and important. This essay offers a summary overview of the issues to which the *Notebooks* give rise, at the same time as it also aims to provide a preliminary assessment of their overall significance, especially in relation to what they show about the nature and development of Heidegger's thinking from the early 1930s to the late 1940s.

For much of his life, and certainly from the 1930s onwards, Martin Heidegger kept a series of black-bound notebooks in which he recorded ideas and observations. Known as the *Black Notebooks* (*Schwarze Hefte*), the material they contained was periodically edited by Heidegger, and he gave different titles to different volumes and sets of volumes. Of those so far published, the first three collected volumes are the *Considerations* (*Überlegungen*; see Heidegger, 2016, 2017)¹, which run from 1931 to 1942 (though the first volume from 1931 is lost, destroyed by Heidegger himself), and the second are the *Remarks* (*Anmerkungen*), running from 1942 to 1949 (published in the Heidegger *Gesamtausgabe* as Heidegger, 2014a, b, c, 2015). Further volumes are to be published over the coming years (and the next volume is, in fact, already close to being ready for publication). The contents of the *Notebooks* are quite varied: they include philosophical ideas and commentary, but they also include personal observations and ruminations, and remarks on contemporary events. In contrast with public works from the same period, the *Notebooks* are relatively unrestrained, they contain many instances of dismissive irony or sarcasm, and, in the 1930s

and early 1940s especially, they are frequently suffused with a degree of anger and even bitterness. The form of the *Notebooks* echoes that of Nietzsche's *Nachlass* (see Babich, 2016; see also Krell, 2015), and clearly Heidegger treated the *Notebooks* not merely as a writing tool for his own personal use but as literary works of a certain type and character and as having a very particular role and position within the larger body of his work. They do not stand on their own, however, and it would be a serious mistake to suppose that one could read the *Notebooks* in any serious fashion independently of the rest of Heidegger's writings.

Since the publication of the first of the *Notebooks* in 2014, the volumes have provoked a storm of controversy, with many readers taking them to prove what they assume to be already evident, namely Heidegger's reprehensible moral and political character (see, for instance, Wolin, 2014). It is certainly true that the *Notebooks* contain many statements that, from a contemporary perspective, are beyond the pale. Not unsurprisingly, given what we know from other sources about Heidegger's involvement in the Nazi Party in the early 1930s, the volumes from those years contain examples of Heidegger's seeming intoxication with the National Socialist Revolution and his enthusiasm for its leader, Adolf Hitler. What the *Notebooks* also show, however, is the extent to which Heidegger's support for National Social-

¹The English edition of these volumes forsakes the straightforwardness of "Considerations" for the rather more laboured "Ponderings" (seemingly with no sense of the awkwardness and pomposity to which such a translation gives rise).

ism rapidly turned sour, and the strength of that initial support was transformed into an antagonism directed not only at the Nazis but also at Christianity, Catholicism, Bolshevism, Americanism, modernity, science, and what he calls “world Jewry” (*Weltjudentum*). The passages from the *Notebooks* that have provoked most controversy are, in fact, those anti-Semitic passages that actually come from the period *after* Heidegger’s break with Nazism (no such passages are to be found in the volumes prior to around 1938) – passages in which Heidegger seems almost to repeat a fairly crude stereotypical-seeming contradiction of his own injunctions elsewhere against exactly such bigotry and racialism.

Although it does not diminish their distressing or reprehensible nature, the anti-Semitic passages in the *Notebooks* are concentrated in only a few places, all of them, as noted above, after 1939, and anti-Semitism is not itself a recurrent or major theme in the *Notebooks* overall (one might argue, in fact, that the manner of its appearance suggests that it is almost something taken for granted, so that it is treated as barely even worthy of comment either for or against). The most powerful strands in the *Notebooks* from the 1930s and into the 1940 are actually tied to the shifts in Heidegger’s thinking that occur after the “failure” of *Being and Time* (Heidegger’s own failure to complete the project originally envisaged there and the failure evident in the many misinterpretations the work engendered) (see Thomä, 2005) and after the failed political engagement of the early 1930s. It is these shifts that underlie what has often been referred to as the *Kehre* or *Wendung*, the “turning”, in Heidegger’s thought² and are brought to a special focus in his major volume from the 1930s, withheld from publication at the time, the *Contributions to Philosophy* (*Beiträge zur Philosophie*), written between 1936 and 1938.

The reorientation in thinking that is associated with these shifts is complex, not always consistent, and takes place over more than a decade and a half – from 1930 until 1946; it is a reorientation that encompasses, but does not end with, *Contributions*, even though that volume plays a pivotal part in it. The fact that the *Notebooks* from the 1930s and 1940s do indeed belong to such a period of reorientation, and that they reflect the attempts at such reorientation, ought to be a simple and obvious point – one that is underscored by the fact that the *Notebooks*, as we have them, begin in 1931, in other words, at around the time that Heidegger himself identified as the starting point for the new direction in his thinking after *Being and Time*.³ Yet simple and obvious though it ought to be, it is a point to which attention is seldom ex-

plicitly drawn. The period covered by the first four collected volumes of the *Notebooks* – from 1931 to 1948 – is a period not only of historical turmoil for Germany and for the world but also of personal and philosophical turmoil for Heidegger himself. It is thus no surprise that there is a sense of struggle (*Kampf*) that permeates the *Notebooks* (see Vallega-Neu, 2016) and that, one might add, is also present in many other works from the same period (especially those that remained unpublished at the time). In this respect, just as it would be a mistake to treat *Contributions* (or *Being and Time* for that matter) as containing the definitive statement of Heidegger’s thinking, so it would also be an even greater mistake to try to read the *Notebooks* as if they expressed a single, settled, philosophical viewpoint. Indeed, even though, a decade later, Heidegger refers to 1936 as a watershed year for the development of his thought – a point at which he had a clear glimpse of the proper place to which it belonged (the *Contributions* issuing from this) – he nevertheless also talks of a “many-turning journeying [*Wanderschaft*]” within that very same place, and the difficulties (“aberrations [*Irrgänge*] and attempts [*Versuche*]”) encountered along the way (Heidegger, 2015, p. 191).

Yet in spite of the shifts that Heidegger’s thinking undergoes in the 1930s and early 1940s, and in spite of his later acknowledgement of those shifts, there is little sign of uncertainty or self-doubt in the relevant *Notebooks* or in other writings from that same period. Before 1934, the entries in the *Notebooks* show Heidegger’s exuberant enthusiasm for the National Socialist “revolution” and the possibility, as Heidegger saw it, of giving political reality to his own philosophical ideas. After 1934, the *political* enthusiasm vanished, but the revolutionary zeal remained, now transformed into a singularly and resolutely *philosophical* mission. In the *Notebooks*, the failure of the rectorate itself appears not so much as Heidegger’s failure but as a failure of the time and of the university:

The end of my rectorate. April 28, 1934.

My resignation tendered, because a justification no longer possible. *Long live mediocrity and noise!* ... My rectorate was based on a great mistake, namely, my wanting to bring *questions* into the temperament and regard of my “colleagues”, questions from which they were at best *excluded*, to *their* advantage – and undoing. (Heidegger, 2016:119)

Immediately following this passage Heidegger writes the following, seemingly as a reminder to himself:

Need to remain reticent and hard – distant and strong entering again into the inmost plight back into the prompting of the distant injunction. The

²I leave to one side the issue as to whether these terms can both be used to refer to the shift in Heidegger’s thinking in the 1930s and 1940s. Thomas Sheehan, of course, has famously argued that they cannot (see, for instance, Sheehan, 2001).

³See Heidegger’s comments in “Letter on ‘Humanism’” (Heidegger, 1998:249–250). There Heidegger identifies the essay “On the Essence of Truth”, delivered in 1930 but not published until

1945, as marking a key point in the reorientation of his thinking after *Being and Time*.

great concealed event – the remoteness of everything of today. The proximity to the inmost vocation of the people. (Heidegger, 2016:119)

In turning away from the political, Heidegger turns back to the absolute primacy of the philosophical, withdrawing into a form of philosophical solitariness and isolation (part of which is given physical expression in the rural seclusion of Todtnauberg; see Heidegger, 1981:27–30), even of philosophical alienation (a standing apart from the superficial and the mundane), in which the concern with being is given priority over everything else, *including* the political.

One might say that the withdrawal at issue here almost takes the form of an enactment of the ontological difference itself – an enactment of the difference between being and mere “things” – but an enactment in which being is set so far apart from everything else that there is no room for anything *other* than being. Consequently, the prioritisation that it enacts is both absolute and exclusive, resulting in an effective severing of the philosophical from the worldly and the human *and* from any ordinary form of politics. This is strongest in those works in which Heidegger's personal voice is most directly in the fore – works like the *Notebooks*, but also *Contributions* – works in which Heidegger often speaks in a declamatory and almost oracular style. As a result, the Heidegger of the 1930s and early 1940s readily appears, in many passages from the *Notebooks* as well as other works such as *Contributions*, like the sole prophet of a new and apocalyptic religion in which being is the god (see Farin and Malpas, 2017). It is not merely the focus on being that is important here, of course, but the particular character of that focus and the larger context in which it is situated. In the shift from *Being and Time* to *Contributions*, the “there” of being (*Da-sein*) is reconceptualised in terms of the “event” of being (*Ereignis*) which is itself understood, at least during much of the 1930s and 1940s, in direct relation to the history of being, *Seinsgeschichte*. This “history” is in turn associated not only with Heidegger's developing critique of modernity – the critique of what he calls, in the 1930s and 1940s, *machination* (*Machenschaft*) – but also with ideas of people (*Volk*) and nation, and especially of the *German* people. The focus on *being* – on the *history* of being, on the appropriations of being in the destinies of different *peoples*, and on the almost complete failure of everyone other than Heidegger himself to grasp what is at issue here – gives an extreme and almost obsessive cast to Heidegger's thinking in this period. David Farrell Krell has thus said that the *Notebooks* from 1931 to 1941 are characterised by “the absence of Heidegger's best qualities, namely, his ability to focus and to reflect self-critically, and the presence of his worst, to wit, his aggressive polemics against everything in the world except his own *idée fixe*” (Krell, 2015, p. 160).⁴

⁴In contrast, although writing before the publication of the *Notebooks*, Slavoj Žižek to some extent argues in favour of the “extrem-

It is against the background of just such extreme thinking – thinking that has, in many respects, been pushed to the edge – that many of the anti-Semitic passages in the *Notebooks* have to be read. Peter Trawny and Donatella di Cesare have argued that the *Notebooks* show that anti-Semitism is actually at the centre of Heidegger's thinking, at least in the 1930s and 1940s, and that Heidegger's is therefore an anti-Semitic philosophy. Although he accepts Heidegger's rejection of any simple biologically based racism, Trawny argues that Heidegger nevertheless holds to an “onto-historical anti-Semitism” (Trawny, 2014). Di Cesare sees Heidegger's anti-Semitism as expressive of a more pervasive rootedness of a metaphysical anti-Semitism thinking in German philosophy in general (see, for instance, Di Cesare, 2016). The evidence provided by the *Notebooks* seems, however, to be inadequate to support either of these claims – too much of the argument of Trawny and di Cesare depends on supposition that is additional to, and even an exaggeration of, the relatively sparse material contained in the *Notebooks* themselves (though di Cesare's larger claims concerning the anti-Semitic strands within German philosophy undoubtedly bear further examination). However, Trawny and di Cesare are correct just inasmuch as Heidegger's anti-Semitic comments are indeed not a reflection of some personal anti-Semitic leaning but rather have their contingent origins in Heidegger's philosophical thinking⁵ – they arise out of the obsessive attempt to think being, and only being, and to do so in a way that also reads the contemporary state of the world in the light of that obsession, as this is also coloured by Heidegger's own personal-historical circumstances. In doing so, Heidegger is sometimes insightful, but at other times he also seems to fall victim to convenient caricatures and stereotypes – and not only those associated with the anti-Semitic.

In this respect, what the *Notebooks* make most evident is not any genuinely new element or aspect in Heidegger's thinking – there are, for the most part, no significant philosophical ideas in the *Notebooks* that are not present, usually in more developed forms, in contemporaneous lectures and essays⁶ – but rather the underlying tone or temper (*Grundstimmung*) of that thinking (as Heidegger him-

ity” of Heidegger's thinking in the 1930s as against the *Gelassenheit* of the post-war period (“Beware of Gentle Openness!”) (see Žižek, 2017:95–153, 148–153). Although his reading is an interesting and provocative one, I would argue that Žižek's Lacanian predilections lead to a misreading of Heidegger's thinking, particularly of the post-war thinking.

⁵Although *philosophical*, there is nothing *inevitable* about Heidegger's anti-Semitism – it does not follow necessarily from any of his basic philosophical commitments – hence the emphasis on its *contingent* origins.

⁶This is also a point to which Krell draws attention: “I myself find very little in these thousand pages that is thought provoking. They do present a dire view of Heidegger in a dire time, and it is important that they be made available to the public. Yet, to repeat, there is precious little here that adds to Heidegger's more considered

self says, though with a different sense of what is at issue, in 1938; see Heidegger, 1997:426). This tone and temper – especially the extremism and obsessiveness, but also the declamatory character – is indeed a direct reflection of Heidegger's insistence on the absolute separation of the thinking of being from any other thinking that might be oriented towards mere things, and the superiority and priority of the former over the latter (something closely tied, in addition, to the highly abstract nature of the thinking at issue here). However, the *Notebooks* also show how, following the end of the war, the tone and temper of Heidegger's thinking changes significantly, taking on a more subdued and reflective character in the latter half of the 1940s (though occasionally there are still outbursts that echo the earlier extremism) and shifting away from the declamatory, almost oracular, style of the previous decade or more. It is this different tone and temper, and different style, that characterises not only the later volumes of the *Notebooks* but also Heidegger's more public writings from around 1946 onwards – in essays like the “Letter on ‘Humanism’”, from 1946–47, and even more so in volumes like *What is Called Thinking* from 1951–52.⁷ This shift is itself connected with the emergence in Heidegger's thinking of a more explicit concern with *place* – in Greek *topos* and in Heidegger's German, *Ort* or *Ortschaft*.

That place occupies a central role in Heidegger's thinking is a claim that has been advanced by a number of thinkers, perhaps most notably Joseph Fell, Edward Casey, and Reiner Schürmann, but also Julian Young and Stuart Elden, and it has also been an important theme in my own work. Place is not, however, a concept that is explicit in Heidegger throughout the entirety of his thought. Although it may be argued to be implicit from the start (and I have myself argued for just this claim; see Malpas, 2006), the focus on place seems to become more evident in the period following Heidegger's departure from the rectorate in 1934, and to be at its clearest and most explicit in the work after 1946 (“Building Dwelling Thinking” being a prime example, see Heidegger, 1971:141–160). Heidegger comes to refer to the entirety of his thinking as taking the form of a “topology of being”, but until the publication of the *Notebooks*, there were only two clear instances of that phrase in Heidegger's published work, the first being from “The Thinker as Poet” in 1947⁸ and the second from the Le Thor Seminar in 1969 (see Heidegger, 2004:47) (there

is also a third, though less straightforward, instance in which topology as a discussion of the place or “locale” of being also appears – see Heidegger, 1998:311–312). In the *Notebooks*, however, and more particularly, in the *Remarks* from 1946 to 1947, the language of place and topology abounds – and so we find talk of the topology of being (*Topologie des Seyns*) (see Heidegger, 2015:201–202, 434, 512), as well as of the place of thinking (*Ortschaft des Denkens*) (see Heidegger, 2015:191), the place of the event (*Ortschaft des Ereignisses*) (see Heidegger, 2015:301, 310, 315, 316, 328), and the place of being (*Ortschaft des Seyns*) (see Heidegger, 2015:202). Here the *topology of being* appears to have replaced the *history of being*, and even the ontological difference itself eventually recedes into the background (see Heidegger, 2004:60–61). Thus, again in the *Remarks*, Heidegger talks of “getting over being” (*Verwindung des Seyns*), as well as of giving up philosophy and historiography (*Historie*) and history (*Geschichte*) too (Heidegger, 2015:222–223; see also p. 500). The explicit turn to place in Heidegger's thinking, which is where the reorientation that begins in the early 1930s seems finally to arrive, and which can be seen so clearly in the *Notebooks* from the middle to late 1940s (*Remarks*), is thus also a shift away from the extremism, isolation, and obsessiveness of the previous decade or more and towards a renewed sense of engagement with the unity of the world, the unity of being and “things”, as is given in and through place.

The reorientation that occurs over the course of the *Notebooks* is connected not only to Heidegger's thinking of place but also to his thinking of technology and modernity. Indeed, one might argue that this is, in fact, the other key theme that the *Notebooks* bring powerfully to the fore. Although there are indications of Heidegger's critical stance towards technology and modernity already in *Being and Time*,⁹ this is not a topic that has any special salience in the earlier work. In the *Notebooks* from the 1930s, however, it becomes a recurrent and central theme, and there can be no doubt that it is implicated in both Heidegger's engagement with Nazism and his disengagement from it (as the infamous comment in *Introduction to Metaphysics* indicates (see Heidegger, 2000:213) and as the *Notebooks* themselves confirm). Yet although the critique of technology that is developed in the 1930s, and that is especially evident in the *Notebooks*, is the precursor to what appears in the essays from the late 1940s and early 1950s (most obviously, “The Question Concerning Technology”; see Heidegger, 1977:3–35), it is also clear that the earlier critique is much cruder and conceptually less articulate than the later. The talk of machination that abounds in the *Notebooks* from the 1930s and into the 1940s disappears in the post-war writings, including the later *Note-*

Beiträge and other published works of the 1930s” (Krell, 2015:127–128).

⁷See, once again, Krell's comments after he has pointed to the stylistic inadequacies of Heidegger's writing from the 1930s and 1940s: “The situation improves in the 1950s, when Heidegger develops a style all his own. Signs of an independent style doubtless appear already in his best writing and thinking of the 1930s, and it matures in the extraordinary essays of the 1950s, ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, ‘Poetically Man Dwells...’, and ‘The Thing’” (Krell, 2015:160).

⁸“But poetry that thinks, is in truth the topology of being” (Heidegger, 1971:12).

⁹Most notably in the very brief comment on radio: “With the ‘radio’, for example, Dasein has so expanded its everyday environment that it has accomplished a de-severance of the ‘world’ – a de-severance which, in its meaning for Dasein, cannot yet be visualised” (Heidegger, 1962:140 [H105]).

books. *Machenschaft*, with its etymological connection to both *machen*, to make or to do, and to *Macht* (power), obviously carries echoes of the Nietzschean will to power (*Wille zur Macht*), and the use of the term also indicates how much of Heidegger's thinking during the 1930s and early 1940s, including his opinion of modernity, is bound up with the attempt to come to terms with Nietzsche. However, just as Nietzsche largely disappears from Heidegger's thinking after the mid-1940s, so too is *Machenschaft* not a term that is operative in any of Heidegger's later discussions of technology and modernity. Instead, *Machenschaft* gives way to *Gestell*, and what is significant about this latter term is that it carries a clear topological connotation – as suggested by Andrew Mitchell's translation of the term as “positionality” in the English edition of the Bremen Lectures of 1949 (see Heidegger, 2012).¹⁰ *Gestell* is essentially a mode of spatialised ordering and, as such, it is a mode of ordering that obscures the essential placedness of being, of things, and of the world.¹¹ The shift to topology is thus itself an important element in Heidegger's more developed post-war analysis of technology and modernity – something that should already be evident from the post-war essays themselves¹² and is also demonstrated by the development of ideas in the pages of the *Notebooks*.

The shift both from history to place and from *Machenschaft* to *Gestell* indicates the difference in temper and orientation that occurs over the course of the *Notebooks* and that the *Notebooks* to a large extent allow us to map out. It is a shift that opens out into the very different thinking that characterises the later Heidegger – a thinking that, even though it arises out of the earlier and is in some ways continuous with it, is also very different from it. The real significance of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* does not lie, then, in any new or unprecedented ideas that the *Notebooks* enunciate or even in the scandalous pronouncements they may be thought to contain. Instead the *Notebooks* are important precisely because of the way they better enable us to understand the development of Heidegger's thinking, in terms of its overall direction, the dead ends into which it runs, and the dangers that it encounters. It enables us better to evaluate and position works like *Contributions* in relation to Heidegger's thinking

overall and to see why even *Contributions*, as with *Being and Time*, is a work that Heidegger had to move beyond.

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¹⁰The translation is not without its problems, but the topological connotations that the term *Gestell* carries are nonetheless significant – see my discussion in Malpas (2012:97–112).

¹¹See my discussion in Malpas (2006:278–303) and Malpas (2018, chap. 9). In relation to Nietzsche, it is also worth examining the very last of the works included in Heidegger's Nietzsche volumes, “Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being” (see Heidegger, 1982), in which the language of place – including the idea of the locale or place of being (see Heidegger, 1982:216–219) – comes to the fore.

¹²See “The Thing”, in Heidegger (1971:161–184), which begins with a discussion of the way modern media technology changes the character of the near and far.

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